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AUTHOR Bertch, Julie
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ABSTRACT

In an effort to help basic skills students learn the skills they need to survive in college-level studies and remediate critical areas as quickly as possible, many community colleges have overlooked the value of other studies and the more general literacy that is essential to any education. By rushing to comply with students' utilitarian goals, the colleges may be disregarding the real needs of students to: (1) develop their ability to think; (2) share a common cultural literacy; (3) defend themselves against slanted information; and (4) understand the tradition and ways of thought that have shaped and still drive their culture. At the Maricopa Community Colleges, an effective, efficient basic skills program has been developed using a modified competency-based plan. All of the skills developed in the program feed into global competencies expected of students entering a college-level course. An additional component that would help these classes serve as the basis for ongoing success would be to make the humanities the content area for basic skills instruction. With humanities as the content, writing assignments can be designed to encourage students to explore new ideas and new perspectives; instruction in note taking, textbook analysis, and test taking can simultaneously introduce new interests and information; and thinking skills courses can make use of a limitless wealth of humanities content to challenge students to think. The incorporation of humanities content into basic skills courses will provide an involving, high interest context for any difficulty level, and inculcate students with the need for learning. (LAL)

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The Humanities as Content in Basic Skills Programs

Julie Bertch, Ph.D.

Maricopa Community Colleges

Phoenix, Arizona

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The Humanities as Content in Basic Skills Programs

For some time now, the problems that have accompanied the underprepared student into the community college have been our greatest challenge. We have directed a great deal of energy and creativity at finding more effective and efficient ways to help these students learn the skills they need to survive in college level studies. In doing so, I fear, we have overlooked--and therefore diminished--the value of other studies that are essential in any education. My point is this: in our need to provide success for basic skills students, with a goal of making an educational difference for most of them instead of just a few, and because of our hurry to remediate in the really critical areas, we have overdone it. We find ourselves preparing basic skills students too narrowly to function in the roles ahead of them. Their success may be jeopardized not by lack of basic skills but by the lack of a more general literacy.

The impetus is obvious. In the last few years, we have seen the emphasis in community college programs grow increasingly more involved with programmatic goals, whether professional or occupational. Whether this is due to the materialistic outlook of the present generation, as some claim, or their rush to finish their education and get on with their lives, as others believe,

doesn't matter. At any rate, we know our students possess very utilitarian goals--they want decent paying jobs--and they are very practical in nature. They are not "given to reflection or imagination." (Selengut, 2)

And, since the mission that community colleges seek so diligently and guard so defensively states that we must derive our activities from the needs of the community we serve, we have rushed to comply with this new utilitarian education. But are we, as Selengut says, "sacrificing our legimate authority as educators," are we actually "serving the interests of business and industry" (Selengut, 2) and disregarding the real needs of our students?

In his discussion of the humanities as an enabling curriculum, Schulz reminds us that "the sort of thing one learns in studying the humanities . . . (is) crucial to the success of any significant human undertaking." (12) In every kind of work people have to make decisions and act accordingly, and there is no technical training or rule that can tell them what they should do. Such decisions and actions require judgment, based on thinking and consideration--and experience. Without the oppportunity to engage in such activities, our students will remain as inflexible, their beliefs as unchallenged, as they are when we first see them.

We know all students need to develop their ability to think. The

humanities, we all agree, provide the opportunity for this to happen. Marty describes the liberally educated person as one who has "established the practice of continually expanding and refining (his) ability to read, write, speak, and think," and "cultivated the habit of reflection on the meaning of one's doings, customs, and beliefs." (2)

Thinking such as this demands more than the time to do so and the inclination. Without a certain body of knowledge as a touchstone, that which Marty describes as the "knowledge and understanding that make one a shareholder in a common culture," (2) no one is able to develop the perspective needed to respond appropriately to the cultural environment. Students who lack a "shared cultural literacy" (Gross, 10) will not function as critical thinkers, will not be able to defend themselves again slanted information, and will not understand the common skills and meaning in all disciplines of learning if they have no access to the traditions and ways of thought that have shaped and still drive that culture.

As a community college, our mission announces a responsibility to take students at whatever functioning level they possess and to help them learn the skills they need to function in whatever situation their individual goals indicate. To begin with, this is an incredible task. On our campus, we have found ourselves faced with an enormous discrepancy between what entering students could do and what they needed to be able to do if they were to be

successful. The only answer we could see was to increase the efficiency with which we did the job of remediating these students' deficiencies.

Like most remedial/developmental programs, we have had to work under a number of constraints, the more important of which (not surprisingly) are based on time and money. Additional problems come from the expectations of our minority population, expectations that are the result of their particular situations, experiences, values, and perceptions. For example, regular attendance is not a priority with many students, a passive style of participation is the norm, and books can be bought next week when there's money. Because of the nature of their lives and the high incidence of critical events, an effective educational system has to be specific, concrete, and sequential. In other words, in order to learn, these students need instruction that plainly says what to do and how to do it. If they are to persist, they have to be able to put their work down while they attend to other things and then pick it up again when they can.

In addition, we operate under the usual conditions and restrictions: we are bound by a sixteen-week term with the traditional clock-scheduling, too few institutional resources are available to meet all the special needs of underprepared students, and the students are impatient to catch up and get themselves in

what they consider college work. The resulting plan, the outcome of several semesters of planning and development, is an effective, efficient basic skills program.

We have a modified competency-based plan comprised of a core of basic skills courses--English, reading, and math--each course consisting of three one-hour modules. Based on as thorough a skill assessment as feasible and subsequent advisement, students enroll in an appropriate level of reading, writing, and math (in reading and writing, there are three skill levels of courses that try to take a student from functionally illiteracy to 100-level entry requirements). The instruction presents a sequence of activities that will result in the student's development of specific competencies around which each module is built. The student works on each skill--some individually and as groups--and takes a competency test at prescribed intervals. He goes on to the next module when he has demonstrated his ability. The class moves as a whole and as individuals; in one semester, for example, some students earn 3 credits; some manage only one. The focus is always on learning to use required skills.

In addition, students enroll in a variety of basic skills elective courses. The premise behind the development of these electives was that putting students in 100-level courses at the same time they were upgrading their basic skills was almost guaranteeing their

failure--while also negatively affecting the content level and requirements of those 100-level courses. So, in addition to the core courses, our students choose to take study skills, or speech skills, or reading electives in spelling or vocabulary, thinking skills--or even a keyboarding course.

All these skills feed into our global competencies (a statement developed and approved throughout the Maricopa district) that are expected of any student entering a 100-level course. In a sense, credit in our basic skills courses is our certification that students possess what they need to be successful college students. And so we send them into occupational/vocational programs that teach them job skills or into program requirements that prepare them for transfer. They graduate, the successful, persistent ones, and move into the work force or go on to the university. We have obviously reached our goal with these students.

I think we have to look further. When they get wherever they're heading, how does it go? Is it comfortable? Do they know the same things and have the same skills as the people around them? Or do they feel some sort of deficit when they need to interact with the mainstream culture? Perhaps we need to realize that in our attempt to isolate and prescribe what our students need for success, we've neglected something very important. I believe that to provide a base for ongoing success, we need to consciously make the

humanities part of all remedial/developmental education. Skills classes are a natural. Since such instruction can't happen in a vacuum and requires a context of some form, we should make the humanities the content area for basic skill instruction. Instead of making up materials or adapting anything available, we need to purposefully plan for including a world of knowledge and values that we agree educated people should know about. It's an opportunity we shouldn't miss--an opportunity for these students to become acquainted with the mainstream culture where they tell us they plan to spend at least the working hours of their lives.

How do we implement such a plan? I know how I will. Students in my English classes learn about the choices they have in writing their language by manipulating ideas through sentence-combining. My text uses student written items--considered useful because they relate to the real world of the students. But they already know the rules of that world. Why not let the content of the sentences they work with introduce them to something new? Couldn't that be useful as well?

My students do a lot of writing too, and sometimes it seems they have very little to say. I think the freewriting I have them do helps them explore their options, but I think the material I give them before they write gives them new ideas or lets them see something in a different way. Why, for example, would Richard Cory

do a dumb thing like that?

In my study skills classes, I have experimented with content that has brought new interests to the course. While students are learning to take lecture notes, analyze textbook passages, and take tests, they have been introduced to a great deal more. An art history instructor showed them the ten paintings she wants everyone to know about; a philosophy instructor talked about Plato's cave; an anthropologist described the symbol system we call language in a way my students had never heard before. Weeks later, they remember enough to say, "I know about that."

Reading courses could offer the world. We can adjust readability without destroying the importance of an idea, we can use vocabulary study to lead to whatever content we want to include, and a speller has to spell something worthwhile. And our thinking skills course, I am convinced, offers the most exciting prospects of them all. When we are faced with students who accept without questioning, who assume the world really is the way it appears, who don't see alternatives and never examine assumptions, the word "challenge" becomes an understatement.

For us, it's the next step--and already underway. We can't accept our students' impatience to reach a programmatic goal as defeat. They may consider our suggestions about general education study as

frivolous and tell us it takes more time than they can spare, but we can still provide the cultural knowledge we want them to have. Those of us who believe Selengut's idea that occupational and social class stagnation are likely outcomes for those who lack a general knowledge that allows for sensitivity and adaptability need to take responsibility for providing that learning. Wherever our students' knowledge lacks overlap with the mainstream culture, wherever we can see that the set of knowledge by which they make sense of the world will not provide the same sense in the shared culture, we need to contrive to give them that information base.

How to go about it? A simple plan begins where our basic skills program left off. There we asked, "What specific skills must these students have to successfully deal with the demands of 100-level courses? From there we could ask, "What knowledge do they need to understand the metaphors, the nuances, the references of the general culture? What mythological or historical allusions will they hear, what does every generally educated person who grew up in standard-English speaking America know about art, music, ideas, cultural values?

Then, what parts of this content interact easily with the kinds of skills we teach? What can be presented in discrete pieces, subordinate to skill development but nonetheless memorable? What will provide an involving, high interest context for any difficulty

level? What will show that learning for learning's sake is worthwhile?

I see many advantages of purposefully contriving to use the humanities for this content. For one thing, it may be our last chance to inculcate in our students the need for learning. Also, it would involve the students in our basic skills program with faculty who teach only at the 100-level, thereby putting both groups in the larger, real context of the community college. It will benefit us as faculty as well, by providing an opportunity for team or shared efforts while it gives us a new world of choices in our classes--the chance to originate, not just deliver, course content. We can agree on the skills we will teach in any given course, but we can exercise our academic prerogative about its content.

The Maricopa Colleges, states the Arts and Sciences Task Force report, are committed to the belief that all graduates should possess the skills and breadth of knowledge necessary to live full and productive lives. . . providing for the acquisition of the skills and knowledge every literate citizen possesses . . . separate from the specialized skills and knowledge required for either advanced academic study or employment. If this is what separates our students from the authentically educated, then it our responsibility to make that content available. In very few other

places in the curriculum is there a space for content as obvious and apparent as that available in the basic skills programs. As humanities people, we know we have a responsibility for educating our students in their culture. When those students' subculture is the only one they recognize, we have a greater responsibility. If we believe that the comparisons and contrasts they will recognize when they know more about the bigger world will lead them to value both cultures more, then we need to move. Let's take the opportunity to be different--and to make a difference.

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